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# A Voice Within: An Autoethnographic Account of Moving from Closed to Open Prison Conditions by a Life-Sentenced Prisoner

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*Abstract: This article explores the lived experience of transitioning from closed to open prison conditions by a mandatory life-sentenced prisoner. Using autoethnographic methodology the lead author's experience of this significant life-sentence event forms the basis of a wider discussion. Research around this process is lacking. This article examines the phenomena around prisoner identity, prison culture and prisoner adaptation; it explores what impact of years spent in the closed prison estate can have on how open prison conditions are experienced. The authors identify important social and ontological obstacles to successful transition to open conditions and reflect on how it exposes the enduring harms resultant from serving a life sentence.*

**Keywords:** adaptation; autoethnography; lived experience; open prison; prison

This article employs a first-person perspective in which the lead author draws from his experience as a long-term prisoner transitioning from closed to open conditions in 2017. It is autoethnographic in the sense that his (Micklethwaite's) experience and subjectivity are foregrounded as an appropriate mechanism for developing understandings of both a significant personal life event and UK penal conditions more generally. In drawing directly from this personal experience of imprisonment, the authors develop autoethnographic techniques that rarely feature in penological research. Adopting a reflective approach they are guided by the advice of C. Wright Mills (1951), who long ago urged sociologists to locate themselves and their own experiences in their work and the 'trends of their epoch' (p.xx). Imprisonment and more specifically the enormous growth in the numbers of life-sentenced prisoners in UK prisons is, unfortunately, just such a trend (Prison Reform Trust 2019). The 'private troubles'

referred to in this article, despite the peculiarities of their penal context, surely qualify as ‘public issues’ in that they offer valuable insights into a pivotal feature of a prison sentence.

The experience of transitioning from closed to open prison conditions has been neglected in the research literature even though for life-sentenced prisoners this is a major life event. It features in a significant cohort of prisoners who face a substantial challenge to the self-management and equilibrium they have established in closed conditions (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2020; Honeywell 2015). This article will illustrate how some of the challenges are negotiated in both prisoner culture and administrative procedures.

Autoethnography is not just appropriate but important here in the provision of a distinctive perspective on the way in which a prison sentence is experienced and managed by a prisoner. Such accounts ‘from the inside’ are rare because, in general, prisoners or ex-prisoners are not expected to be able to fashion their own accounts of imprisonment that satisfy the criteria of conventional, positivistic social science. Jewkes (2012, p.64) argues that prison research can do more to recognise the way in which the experience of incarceration can be ‘flattened by the overarching dominance and disproportionate power of quantitative methods’ and their epistemological assumptions, asserting: ‘bald statistics conceal complex lives and important stories’. In this article, we seek to foreground something of that complexity and assert its importance.

In the UK, conventional ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research have generated accounts of prison life that are richly detailed and sensitively drawn (Crewe 2009; Jewkes 2002; Leibling with Arnold 2004; Phillips 2012). Autoethnography involves looking back on personal experience in specific temporal and geographical contexts to provide rich and detailed insight into lived experience. It offers new ways of understanding what and how prisoners experience, understand, reflect and respond to the prison environment. Its use of personal, first-person accounts are often intended to be more emotionally evocative of various sociological or anthropological themes than conventional social scientific writing. Ellis, Adams and Bchner (2011) describe how its component elements combine as ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)’ (p.1). It is a process of structured reflection and reviewing of lived experience which seeks to bring past experience into the present for a variety of analytical, heuristic or hermeneutic purposes.

Autoethnography is increasingly a feature of service-user and expert-by-experience research (Robertson, Carpenter and Donovan-Hall 2017). Both have developed from mental health practice or therapies that ask service users to ‘tell their stories’ as an aspect of clinical interventions so that a suitable diagnosis can be completed and an appropriate treatment can be formulated for them. In mental health services, alternative possibilities for overcoming trauma and recovering a life have developed techniques that allow individuals to provide accounts of themselves and for themselves so that they acquire the power to tell their stories and frame their ‘narrative

of recovery' (Slade 2009, p.31). This collaborative approach is less common in criminal justice contexts and particularly rare among prison researchers. There are, however, increasing signs of this approach in desistance studies. McNeill and Graham (2018) and Weaver (2016) demonstrate the value and creative possibilities of listening closely to the voices of experience and working creatively in egalitarian partnerships with involuntary service users, such as people emerging from incarceration.

In conventional prison research the voices of former or existing prisoners are gathered by researchers and presented within narratives that weigh the contrasting variety of experiences, identify common or recurring themes and analyse their significance in the light of theoretical insights and methodological constraints. They are often well-crafted and substantial contributions to knowledge about prisons but partly as a result, prisoners rarely speak of, or for, themselves. The conventions of social science prefer wide samples and the assemblage of many voices that reflect more than the experience of a single person. Perhaps it is reasonable for this approach to dominate the discipline and it generates significant appreciation and understanding of prison life. It need not however, preclude a more idiographic emphasis on the detail of personal and singular perspectives, but such accounts remain rare within prison studies.

The absence of such voices and perspectives has led to the production of a journal dedicated to rectifying this absence. The *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* (*JPP*) 'attempts to acknowledge the accounts, experiences, and criticisms of the criminalized by providing an educational forum that allows women and men to participate in the development of research that concerns them directly' (Journal of Prisoners on Prison 2020). However, in seeking to advance prisoner perspectives the *JPP* can sometimes unfortunately operate as a kind of academic ghetto to which such authors are directed and confined. The work of supporting and developing the academic potential of prisoners is thus diverted to the margins of the discipline and largely ignored by the mainstream. The assumption that prisoners and ex-prisoners are not adequate to their own narratives but require the conveyancing of criminologists to provide necessary context, methodological rigour and theoretical substance for them thus survives relatively unchallenged within the discipline (Couldry 2010). Conventional, mainstream criminology contributes to an 'exilic marginality' (Earle 2020) that tends to be the fate of most prisoners, in prison and beyond. Michel Foucault is no stranger to most criminologists but many are reluctant to acknowledge their complicity in the subjugating practice of academic positioning that leaves 'knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated; naive knowledges, located low down in the hierarchy, beneath the required level of scientificity' (Foucault 1988, p.82). An unusual, analogous but paradoxical example of the value of such forms of subjugated knowledge might be recognised in the accounts of the royal family proffered by Meghan Markle. While copious scientific, historical, theoretical and empirical knowledge of the highest academic standards might have suggested the British royal family harboured significant misogynistic, patriarchal and racist tendencies, it has taken Meghan Markle's sin-

gular testimony to camera to persuade large numbers of people that this may in fact be the case.

This account seeks to do something different by dispensing with ‘scientificity’ and following a single voice. It follows a narrative theme (Earle 2021; Fleetwood *et al.* 2019; Maruna 2001) as a means of illuminating the early stages of a transitional process – transfer from the closed prison estate to the open prison estate for a life-sentenced prisoner. The lead author’s experiences as a prisoner began in 2001, and their life sentence experience in 2007. As authors we have collaborated on the generation of this account by using autoethnographic methods of reflection that draw from the lead author’s personal journal entries. These contemporaneous notes are used to open new perspectives on how a pivotal transition of a life sentence is accomplished. The journal notes presented here in raw form represent the potential of ‘après-coup’ – a term from psychoanalysis that refers to something an individual experiences at a certain time but may make sense of only later, an experience that leaves traces that may be gathered together after the event, after a necessary elapse of time. According to the once-imprisoned French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler (2008), the après-coup was central to the development of his philosophical project, allowing him to synthesise from his prison experiences, novel insights into the nature of being and time that have ‘transformed contemporary European philosophy’ (Earle 2020; O’Donnell (Professor of Education, Maynooth University: personal communication in 2021 re Bernard Stiegler)). While nothing so ambitious, systemic or profound is attempted here, a similar method and account is presented to add to criminology’s methodological palette and offer a unique perspective on a prison life lived inside but looking to the outside. The role of the second author (Rod Earle) has been to help revise and develop the autoethnography. In what follows the use of the first person indicates the primacy of the first author’s narrative.

### **When Life Begins with a Sentence**

At the very beginning of my incarceration my resolve to begin keeping a journal was not orientated towards research but was an attempt to make sense of my situation. However, as I progressed I became increasingly aware of the entrenched problems within prisons and a need to make these visible in an impactful way. I tried not to be too prescriptive about the frequency of my entries as I wanted to avoid writing for the sake of writing. One of the ironies of keeping a prison journal is that it can just reflect back at you the meaningless existence many prisoners endure. My note-taking was unstructured. I simply recorded events, experiences and episodes that I felt had meaning or affected me strongly. As an incarcerated researcher I have insider access to some subjective spaces and experiences that remain largely hidden from conventional prison sociology. Bringing these into critical view using autoethnography can play a vital role in the development of richer understandings of prisoner experience. Such perspectives provide a broader, more robust epistemological base for understanding imprisonment and the possibility of improvements.

The people referred to have been anonymised with pseudonyms and cannot be identified. Care has been taken to ensure that no individual or institution can be identified in the text (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). Although idiographic in form, we would both argue that my narrative has moral, political, academic and social value. Prisons in the UK and elsewhere have long been places where human life is more reduced than repaired. They need radical reform.

### **Moving On, Moving Out, Moving In**

A life-sentenced prisoner must attend a parole board in order to achieve Category D status. Prisoners in England follow a categorisation system that facilitates the management of risk. Those requiring the highest security prisons are deemed 'Category A', and this progresses through B and C to the lowest security level – 'Category D'. A Category D prisoner may be placed in a prison where prisoners have resettlement plans providing access to the local community on a restricted and controlled regime. Life-sentenced prisoners spend many years working towards achieving 'Cat. D' status. They must satisfy a 'sifting' process conducted by the Public Protection Case Services (PPCS) that establishes they have satisfied certain criteria. With good behaviour and rehabilitative progress, the prisoner is sifted from one stage of the procedure to another.

A negative result from a sift process or a first parole hearing can mean more years spent in the closed prison estate so achieving Category D status and progressing to open conditions is one of the most significant events to take place for a prisoner. It represents, symbolically and formally, the idea of release – the end of imprisonment is brought into view and becomes a real possibility. A key feature of this new and tangible reality is contact with the free world – non-prison environments – through mechanisms of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). This can include access to training, educational placements and positions of charity work in the community.

Prisoners are often put in placements established by the prison according to its historical and established connections rather than any specific fit with the individual prisoner's needs. In my example, however, with the support of the prison resettlement department I emailed my curriculum vitae to surrounding universities. As a result, a supportive professor from one of the universities subsequently came to the prison, interviewed me and offered me a placement. This began as a six-month voluntary position and as a result I was offered a contracted position as a research associate, paid according to the university's standard pay scales. To date, I am still pursuing academic and professional development.

I was hopeful that this final part of my sentence would not feel or be like real incarceration. In retrospect, this was probably somewhat naïve of me. In truth I had no point of reference to inform my expectations other than the opinions of other prisoners. One prisoner might suggest a prospective prison is 'good' because of the quality of the gym and catering facilities, while another may attribute the same positive judgment to describe the ready availability of drugs.

At the time of writing (2020), I have been in open prison conditions for several months and although I characterised my experience so far as a good one, one that offered positive benefits, encouraging prospects and welcome changes, there are details and intricacies to my transition that are worthy of closer evaluation. It is relevant, for example, that my description of a good life experience reflects my sense of the lifting of some of the petty, custodial frustrations of closed conditions and my relief at positive progression towards release. However, this 'good life' is relative. If a member of the public were to suddenly find their lives curtailed by the routine restrictions of the open prison estate, I very much doubt that their description of life under its rules would be judged as a good life.

My qualified appreciation for my new circumstances is also likely to antagonise those who believe that imprisonment is meant to be painful rather than 'good'. It is a source of considerable astonishment to many prisoners how incongruent this punitive view is with the aim of prisoner rehabilitation or with successful prisoner community reintegration. This mismatch of perception is referred to as 'the trick' (Wilson 2006), or 'the fiasco' (Drake 2018), of imprisonment: almost all prisoners are released; if the prison has further damaged them, they are likely to be more harmful to the public than when they entered prison.

### **No Escaping Prison Culture**

It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which prison is misunderstood by the public. What it means to criminologists is relatively clear:

Imprisonment in a state sponsored institution ordinarily means learning to live alongside other people under what can be tense, testing, and sometimes brutal conditions, where individuals can lose their autonomy, independence, responsibilities, and dignity, and take on a new prison identity. (de Viggiani 2012, p.2)

The peculiarities of prison life to which the general public are so indifferent are well described by Jewkes (2005):

a certain degree of 'controlled aggression' is required to survive the psychological and physical rigors of imprisonment. Ascendancy achieved by means of threats, bullying, and predatory aggressiveness is not hegemony, but the necessity of establishing a no-nonsense, tough reputation on reception into a new institution is well documented. (p.53)

Both these observations, informed by sustained analysis and research, correspond strongly with the reality of life in the closed prison estate that I have experienced for many years. Not having been immersed in the criminological literature prior to my transfer to open prison conditions, I had the notion that in the new environment there would be less supervision and more freedom. I expected security details, such as cell searches, mandatory drug tests and the use of force against prisoners would be less frequent. I thought that the penal gaze (Crewe 2009) would be softer and there would be more relaxed attitudes towards the items prisoners were allowed to possess, that prisoners would have greater access to technologies



and there would be less of a focus on prisoner control and measurement. However, years of experience also cautioned me to expect that this would mean a higher prevalence of illicit trading, drug use and other manifestations of toxic prison cultures. This toxicity is often revealed by the prevalence of bullying and intimidation, prisoners trading their medication and the ease with which prisoners could obtain illicit articles, such as games consoles and pornography.

Among many of the life-sentenced prisoners I have encountered there is an understanding that these dimensions of prison life are very damaging. I was therefore a little tentative about my first steps into the open prison environment, uncertain of the kinds of cultures they would foster. I had worked very hard to satisfy rehabilitative targets, safeguard a good prison behaviour record and achieve my Category D status. I had a lot to lose.

I resolved to keep reflective notes on my transfer into the new environment as I anticipated, and hoped, that it would be a profoundly significant event. My inevitable misgivings were influenced by the usual prison rumours, malicious, frivolous and otherwise, about what this transfer would entail. There was actually very little information provided by the prison on what I could expect. On arrival at my destination I soon discovered that the usual prison cultures were a very real part of life in the open prison estate, as revealed in my notes:

A few days ago 'Stewart' introduced me to 'Jack', a prisoner who rents out DVDs for chocolate. Stewart vouched for me and so Jack will now deal with me. Jack is serving a sentence for large scale drug importation and he is admittedly a drug dealer by trade. I am also told that he purchases 300 milligram pregablin [a tranquilizer medicine] capsules for two pounds each from a contact in the free world and then sells them to prisoners for a half ounce of tobacco each. This is a very popular drug here and so I imagine he is turning a good trade. Although I am careful of how involved I get in prisoner culture it is to some degree unavoidable, unless I am prepared to stay in my room for the next two and a half years. Even that is no guarantee as the young quiet guy, who plays chess with me in my room most evenings, asked me if I could source him pregablin for payment in tobacco. I do have some concerns that I might be suspected of involvement by staff due to association or proxy, but there is little I can do other than limit my associations. So far absolutely everybody I have met is either involved in illicit prison culture, or associated with someone who is. As a result there seems to be a lot of inter-prisoner suspicion with people being labelled as a grass or a snitch. Unless I am being paranoid I too have felt others' gaze upon me, although this feeling is generally receding as I become more familiar with those around me. It is clear to see how so many people indulge in taking and selling drugs here, because it is simply so easy. (personal journal, 14 February 2017)

For me, this ambient culture of illicit trading represented an extra dimension of ontological insecurity, a threat to the kind of person I am and want to be. The ambiguous and troubling feelings these new open conditions generated for me are similar to the dilemmas identified in Shammas's ethnographic work in Norwegian open prison communities. Shammas (2014) found that prisoners had to contend with a 'freedom [that] is occasionally experienced as ambiguous, bittersweet or tainted' (p.106). It



is a conspiratorial kind of freedom permeated with frustration, suspicion and limitation. The structure of choices in all prison environments is determined by the exclusion of the most fundamental freedoms and narrowness of what is legitimate. Although illicit trade and drug use is widespread in closed prison environments, it tends to be more 'underground', necessarily concealed by a prisoner's awareness of security measures. Because of the increased visibility and 'openness' of these illicit behaviours in my new prison environment I found it more difficult to associate with other prisoners in a safe way. In the daily negotiations of space and trust I became more conscious of who I associated with and how this may be interpreted by the more obscure, less tangible prison security mechanisms. The formerly suppressed or disguised features of toxic prison cultures, particularly those associated with illicit drug use and coercion, appeared to lurk around the new informality of the more relaxed regime. In my experience it is something that almost inevitably results in violence and bullying (Cowburn 1998). My notes record my unease:

Although he does not know that I know, there is a traveller [a member of a gypsy community] on the billet selling crack. I know this because one of his customers talked to me about the position he is in. This traveller has been giving him big rocks of crack, up to one hundred and fifty pounds worth at a time, and saying 'pay me when you can'. I imagine this is very difficult for a self-confessed recovering addict to turn down, but to his credit he eventually did. Not surprisingly this has led the traveller to demand all of his debt at once, with the threat of violence if it was not paid this week. Fortunately this traveller does not quite have the intimidating presence he likes to think that he has, and neither is this customer particularly vulnerable to intimidation. As such the customer stood his ground and will pay the instalments as initially agreed. I happen to like this customer. He is a funny and rather charismatic man not befitting the typical addict stereotype. When listening to his story I cannot help but feel a little empathetic. All things considered he is doing rather well. I am not however particularly keen on this traveller, although I am civil through necessity. My dislike stems from the fact that he is a bully, obviously prepared to prey on people's weaknesses. (personal journal, 3 March 2017)

The social dynamics in the above extract are commonplace in my experience of closed prison conditions. However, the increased visibility of this trade in the open prison made it more difficult for me to avoid and thus more threatening. As my notes reveal, I struggled to suppress my feelings towards it, and had to find ways of managing my wariness of the drug dealer.

In order to progress to open prison conditions, prisoners need to have the support of offender supervisors (Crewe 2009). My experience of open prison conditions including illicit prison cultures that reproduce some of the worst aspects of the closed prison environment is suggestive of the durability of these cultures and how they may be intrinsic to penal institutions that gather men together in artificial communities. The open prison estate is intended to more closely reproduce life in the free world as part of preparation for resettlement in the community. Ironically, these communities may be far removed from the idealised 'crime-free' communities imagined to exist outside the prison gates. The dynamics of prison culture

in the above extract may well be representative of the communities from which many prisoners were removed, and to which they will return. In my case, learning to negotiate distance and avoidance to keep myself safe from circumstances that I did not anticipate having to manage on release seemed more punitive than rehabilitative.

When I found myself in open conditions the issue of negotiating prison cultures in a way that would safeguard my progress through my sentence became more pressing. I had to manage my reservations about socialising and communicating within the reality of a less-constrained prison culture. The extra freedom that comes with serving your sentence in the open prison estate necessarily dictates more time out of one's room and so more prisoner contact and interaction. The social dynamics familiar to prison researchers correspond closely with my own experience. As Crewe (2009) observes:

The basic unit of social life was the 'clique'. On most wings, there were a number of solitary men (at least one-fifth of prisoners), who did not fit into stable social groups. However, most prisoners worked themselves into small cliques, consisting of between four and ten people including men who counted as friends and others as associates. These cliques were often made up of prisoners who shared orientations to the sentence, but were also built around regional networks, religion, ethnic identification, age, drug use and interests within the prison. (p.350)

This dynamic is no less relevant for the open prison estate and, as I record in my notes, I quickly found that I gravitated towards a particular group of prisoners:

Over the past few days I have spent some time sitting and talking to my neighbours, 'Matt' and 'Stewart', and another prisoner, 'James', who seems to spend a lot of time in their room. Matt is an army veteran who was a heavy drinker and is serving a sentence for [serious violence]. Stewart openly admits that he loves all kinds of drugs and seems to do things to excess. He states he has worked all of his life and is serving a long sentence for [a serious offence associated with his reckless behaviour]. So far, I know less about James' life. I have shared with them the nature of my offence and parts of my life history. There are no pretences with this group, what you see is what you appear to get. They are all perhaps a little hyperactive and impulsive, with Matt being the sensible influence in the group. They are constantly laughing and joking and I have to admit that I find their humour infectious. Last night was no exception. Under Matt's primary influence, who in a laid back way seems to know what he wants, the group have decided to start a get fit regime together. I was sat in their room yesterday whilst Stewart attempted to tape and tie two five litre plastic containers together, in order to use as a homemade barbell. James then walked in holding one of the billet landing brooms. Without a word he stamped on, and snapped, the broom stalk. This was to thread through the handles of the plastic containers and so form the bar of their barbell. Once constructed they all took turns performing bicep curls, laughing and poking fun at each other as they went. On Matt's turn he noticed that the plastic containers were hot. He then asked why James had filled them with hot water. Stewart then descended into fits of laughter and explained that he had convinced James that hot water was heavier than cold. At this point everyone, myself included, began to laugh out loud. My impression is that the risks these three take will mean I must remain aware of just how involved

I get in their antics. But nonetheless I do enjoy their company. (personal journal, 21 January 2017)

It would seem then, that my adaptations to prison culture in the closed prison estate provided me with the skills I needed for my adaptation to social life in the open prison estate. This is only logical given the prevalence and continuity of prison culture from closed to open prison conditions, but generates a tension with the aim of progression. This feature of a long prison sentence, and particularly the pivot from closed to open conditions deserves close attention from prison researchers who want to build the rehabilitative potential of imprisonment. On arrival I was able to navigate the complex social maze, socialise and make friends with no significant difficulty. But this is not to say that my adaptations to being in the closed prison estate did not cause difficulty for me when trying to adjust to a new, open regime. I experienced real problems in developing coping strategies, my sense of ontological insecurity, my autonomous engagement of prison employment and adjusting my conditioned response to being under constant supervision. I was constantly nervous and hypervigilant in the earlier stages of my arrival in open conditions. The experience of seeing others being transferred back to closed prison condition, on a daily basis, served to emphasise the precariousness of my presence in the new environment.

### **Qualifying for Freedom or Assuming Conformity? Adaptations to an Open Prison**

Hulley, Crewe and Wright (2016) make clear that long-term imprisonment can result in harmful and maladaptive changes to the self. The very adaptations prisoners make in order to survive the enormity of a life sentence can result in personal changes that render life after release far more difficult. Their findings are consistent with those produced ten years earlier:

While the prisoners' coping skills may not deteriorate over time, the outside world will be increasingly changing as custody lengthens, and there will be accumulation of challenges the prisoner will face in coping and coming to terms with the altered environment and his personal losses. (Jamieson and Grounds 2005, p.56)

The qualified freedom, autonomy and choice afforded in the open prison is far removed from that experienced in the closed prison estate. In the open prison my door was never locked unless I locked it from the inside, whereas in the closed prison estate someone locked me in my cell every day, ensuring that for over 13 hours of that day I was out of reach, confined and constrained. For someone who has never been locked up it is hard to imagine what that is like, but I was surprised how little I knew of its effects myself. Despite the prevalence of conventional prison culture in the open prison estate, there were aspects of this new environment that felt very strange and I began to recognise my earlier adaptations to imprisonment were not necessarily going to be helpful.

My experience as a prisoner in the closed prison environment meant that I had learnt to rely on the prison administration to respond to my needs and resolve my predicaments. If my television broke, then I reported

it. If I needed cleaning materials, then I asked an officer. If I wanted to move cells, then I needed to provide a meaningful reason. This loss of autonomy and the growth of this kind of dependency was gradual but had become more deeply entrenched in my psyche than I had previously realised. I was unprepared for how the transition to new conditions exposed the adaptations. My notes reveal the dawning realisation of the extent of my institutionalisation:

After nearly a month of being in open conditions where I can literally come and go as I please I realised yesterday that I am still thinking and behaving, in some instances, as though I were still in closed conditions. Yesterday I was planning an eleven o'clock gym session with 'Dom' – but was reluctant as my shift at work was more or less immediately after the hour-long session, ergo I would not have time to shower and change etcetera. Dom solved my dilemma by simply suggesting that I leave the gym 15 minutes early. I had not even considered this, probably because for years I have been locked in the prison gyms until movement is called at the end of the session. There are no doubt plenty of other instances of my conditioned thinking and behaviour that I am just not aware of. (personal journal, 31 January 2017)

The extra freedoms and the gradually returning sense of my own agency in the open prison was something I took time to learn to appreciate. This freedom arose from the lack of close supervision or active authoritarian control by prison officers. The mundane realities of simply being left to get on with life were unfamiliar. My notes record the process:

Yesterday was a rather surreal day. After a little investigation I found a single room and was told [by a prison officer] that I could move in. Upon entering, the floor was buried under a swamp of dirty clothes and bedding, rubbish and rotting food. One of the fitted wardrobes was crawling with black ants and the window arch had an obvious damp mould problem. I was told by the billet cleaner that the previous occupant had 'lost his mind on spice' [new psychoactive substances] before being sent back to closed conditions. It took me around three hours to clean the room, with cleaning products provided by other prisoners. I then had the task of furnishing my new home. The induction orderly, Tom, provided me with a new mattress and a television aerial. I brought the wardrobe drawer from the induction room, which I am now using as a makeshift desk on the end of my bed. This also makes a useful, but rickety, step when trying to reach or clean the top shelves and cupboards. A prisoner a few rooms down saw my plight and kindly gave me a small square table, which is now dressed with a towel and placed at the side of my bed. Accompanied by Dom, a diamond of a man that I met in a previous establishment, I went in search of a chair for my room. En route around the prison grounds we spotted a swivel desk chair sitting in the rain outside one of the workshops. It was dirty, soaking wet and the broken backrest was tied up with a slither of towel. We quickly pushed the chair back to my room. Having dried it, by leaning it against my radiator all day and night, I am now sat on it whilst writing. The resources and facilities here are bad and it seems that if you do not do for yourself then you are going to do without. I am not used to 'doing' for myself and so this new independence feels a little alien, although I feel I am adjusting okay. (personal journal, 7 January 2017)

The freedom and relative absence of supervision or guidance described above was a real shock to me and I can remember feeling anxious and

worried about the consequences as we pushed the swivel chair back to my room. I was astounded that we could openly push this chair through the prison grounds and past various types of staff without being challenged. The simple notion of doing something for myself, spontaneously, without seeking permission, brought home to me that I was not used to operating without clearly demarcated behavioural boundaries and explicit permissions as to what I could or could not do. The prison research literature may easily and accurately refer to this process as ‘infantilisation’, ‘emasculatation’, or ‘prisonisation’. It may be more subtle than these categorical terms might imply and my purpose in this article is to try to illustrate the correspondence of my experience with this terminology.

After an initial mandatory eight-week work placement, I was offered a job as an orderly and peer mentor in the WH@T (Welfare Housing Action Team) Office. My duties included interviewing and inducting prisoners and gathering information relevant to aiding them with their resettlement. This involved completing administrative processes that enable prisoners to apply for bank accounts, driving licences and various forms of identification needed to access paid work in the community while on ROTL. Although I picked the processes up fairly quickly, I found that I was not very good at thinking on my feet. That is, if a prisoner asked me something that was not clearly set out in the forms I provided, I was at a loss as to how to deal with them. It became clear to me that orderlies in the WH@T Office were expected to use their initiative and discretion and that my capacity to do so had atrophied drastically in ways I had been completely unaware of.

Being able to use discretion and making autonomous decisions in such a way was something that I had been conditioned *not* to do. I had learned how not to think for myself and I felt very uneasy and unsure about now doing so. In this sense, I came to see my experience in the closed prison environment as maladaptive to a busy working office where I was expected to operate more autonomously. I learned the new skills with the help of civilian staff rather than prison officers, and my notes record that I felt a little less like I was in prison, a little closer to the real world:

My boss ‘Tanya’ [civilian staff member], is leaving next month and so the rest of the office have taken to playing pranks on her. Earlier in the week ‘Dave’ [fellow prison orderly] swapped all of the keys around on her keyboard. She ended up locking herself out of her computer and had to ring the I.T. department for help. Yesterday both ‘Karen’ [civilian worker] and Dave had me catch a huge spider and place it under a cup on her desk. The office was full of humorous nervous energy for a good hour as we all waited for her to lift the cup and frighten herself half to death. But Tanya had grown suspicious to these antics and refused to investigate the upside down cup that sat suspiciously on her desk. This eventually backfired for Karen as she is really frightened of spiders and it ended up on her desk, at which point she threatened to sack me if I did not get rid of it. Shortly after Tanya stood behind Karen and gently tickled her hair with her fingertips. Karen, thinking this was our spider, shrieked, jumped up and bolted from the room. Tanya and Karen have now declared war on each other. Each of them took me and Dave to one side and tried to recruit our support in ensnaring the other. Of course we have, rather

tongue in cheek, sworn allegiance to both of them ... This really was a fun afternoon at work. (personal journal, 31 March 2017)

My experiences at work, such as those described above, can be interpreted as positive experiences akin to those encountered in a real workplace. They enabled me to engage and interact with civilians in an environment that allowed me to learn to read expectations and adjust my responses accordingly and appropriately. Small steps perhaps, but easily missed or underestimated.

### **Being Productive: My Coping Strategy**

Over the years I have developed an approach to coping with my life sentence that can be characterised as '*being productive*'. In order for me to accept my long incarceration and reconcile myself to the sense that my life is being wasted I endeavour to make each day productive. My reasoning was that small everyday achievements make the days feel more rewarding while, over the course of a sentence, these achievements amount to personal growth, development and a sense of having an identity of my own, rather than being a possession of the prison. It is very important to stress here that although my approach may appear simple and obviously pragmatic, it was not an easy or quick adaptation to my life sentence. De Viggiani (2012) explains how prisoners may use physical exercise in an unhealthy way to 'bolster their image or self-concept' (p.9), and Jewkes (2005) explains how:

prisoners may seek to re-establish and assert their masculinity throughout their sentences in more subtle ways than simply adopting an aggressive, 'hard man' stance. For example, many inmates construct new identities as students or tradesmen. (p.56)

This is consistent with the point I make here that such activities and behaviours are intrinsically related to the defence, maintenance and development of the self-concept. I recognise them in my own. While in closed prisons, I ensured that my days were as full as possible and over the years I have dedicated what would otherwise be regarded as excessive periods of time to hobbies and interests. First and foremost, my academic development has provided the primary means by which I have navigated my sentence. Extreme fitness regimes, artwork and the game of chess are other resources that I have continuously employed. My journal records this process:

I have just had two full days off work, and so I have had two full days of free time. I spent the majority of the time studying and looking at chess. I also had good training sessions on both days. I did however find myself getting a little bored and restless at times. I still find that I struggle to simply do nothing, to relax. A main coping strategy throughout my sentence has been to keep busy by being productive. Typically this has included my academic development, art, chess and fitness regimes. Having so much more time, in open conditions, means that I am having to be much more productive. The coping strategy manifested from my fear, early in my sentence, of wasting my life and my pursuit of making time productive seems

to have become so conditioned that I do not know how to enjoy relaxing. (personal journal, 4 February 2017)

Arriving in the open prison estate ironically presented me with more of what I find most difficult. The problem was that I was simply not accustomed to such long and open periods of time, and less structured days:

I felt yesterday as though the longer days of being in open conditions had finally caught up with me. I sat in my chair late afternoon, after a day of appointments, a run and a telephone tutorial with my research supervisor, only to realise that my body felt fatigued. When I closed my eyes to try and relax my mind would race. I felt irritable and I could not sit still. Ironically this was my rest day from working in the kitchen. My coping strategy of keeping busy in closed conditions is, I am beginning to realise, not sustainable here. My mum commented yesterday on the telephone that I sometimes sound run down. (personal journal, 16 February 2017)

Although my struggle to adapt to these longer days is to be expected there is a deeper dimension to this coping strategy. My adaptations to being in the closed prison environment served to some degree to distract me from the reality of my situation. I simply did not give myself time to relax for fear that I would be wasting valuable time. I found that being in the open prison estate, I struggled to relax or simply do nothing. If I desisted from exercise for any period of time, I noticed a negative shift in my mood. I experienced degrees of anxiety as I tried to balance feeling tired with the need to keep active. My adaptations to coping in the closed prison environment by actively and productively *consuming* my time had become an intrinsic part of my identity. I also consider that these activities served as a mask (Goffman 1959) for underlying anxieties. I ran the risk of unintentionally developing manic levels of activity, unhealthy manias, which are related to the conditions of surviving my life sentence, which, in turn, made it very difficult for me to reduce my activity levels as my circumstances changed.

I have been incarcerated for over a decade and my inability to relax, and the associated anxieties, can be understood as a perverse Pavlovian effect, a conditioned reflex. My response to arriving in the open prison, presented through this autoethnographic work, corroborates Hulley, Crewe and Wright's (2016) argument that:

adaptation to long-term imprisonment has a deep and profound impact on the prisoner, so that the process of coping leads to fundamental changes in the self, which go far beyond the attitudinal. (p.1)

It is clear that transition from closed to open prison conditions after a significant period of time is far from straightforward and that encouraging further autoethnographic contributions from prisoners could shed important light on the rehabilitative potential of open conditions.

### **Choosing Freedom and Finding My Feet**

In my experience, open prisons are likely to have continuing flows of prison cultures imported from the closed prison estate. The drug culture in the open prison estate can be seen, at least in part, as a result of the re-



laxation of authoritarian supervision and control. This is not necessarily as dysfunctional as might be expected because it is perhaps reasonably consistent with some of the free world communities that some prisoners might rejoin on release.

My exposure to this type of prison culture did not adversely affect my ability to socialise and integrate with the prisoner society of the open prison estate. This prison culture did, however, present a source of ontological insecurity in that I was hypervigilant to modalities of formal and informal surveillance. You might say I became highly attuned to the constant gaze of the State, sensitized to formal and capillary power; a disciplined Foucauldian subject.

My adaptations to the closed prison estate rendered me anxious, unsure and ineffective when I encountered anything resembling a real-world situation, such as a working office environment. I only became aware of my prison-induced limitations in the open prison estate. My dispositions were a conditioned response to having to operate continually within explicit and stringently-enforced boundaries, whereas in the open prison estate the capacity for self-sufficiency, the management of ambiguity and negotiated autonomy is a necessary functional quality I slowly developed.

My personal approach to coping with my life sentence is to emphasise my own productivity and this is something that generated anxiety for me within the open prison estate. The surplus of 'free', unstructured time and time out of my room meant that my personal coping strategies were not sustainable at the levels of intensity I had developed in the closed prison estate. My strategy of perpetual productivity and sense that time must always be made instrumental to specific ends, perhaps served as a mask for the trauma and anxieties that no doubt underly my life sentence experience.

Not being able to maintain my coping strategies for such prolonged and sustained periods arguably resulted in my anxieties and maladaptation becoming more visible. In this way, I found that I struggled to adopt alternative coping strategies. This proved challenging to my general mood and well-being. Evidenced here by this autoethnographic account, then, is the notion that transition from closed to open conditions for life-sentenced prisoners is far more complex than a purely linear or chronological sentence progression process.

Although the phases of a prisoner's institutional career have long been the subject of prison research (Clemmer 1968) there appears to be relatively little existing UK literature that focuses on the pivot between closed and open conditions. This is a knowledge gap that we have tried to narrow, requires further attention and to which prisoners can contribute positively. Thomas Mathiesen (1965) argued many decades ago for research to attend to the 'defences of the weak', the way prisoners negotiate their exposure to, and recovery from, the power to punish. In this account, the lead author, Danny Micklethwaite, uses his first-hand experience, to suggest that open prison provides the final test within prison for life-sentenced prisoners. This singular account of one man's encounter with the 'norms of prisonisation' (Clemmer 1940) and the realities of 'dif-

ferential association' (Sutherland 1947) may lack the theoretical hinterland associated with academic research. It certainly cannot lay claim to the generalisability that accompanies large-scale empirical work about prison, but as an autoethnography of a prison sentence it offers unique insights into a world more usually described without the benefit of direct experience. Both authors have that kind of experience but neither would claim it automatically elevates the account above conventional research, simply that it can add value to it.<sup>1</sup>

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